

Virginia Citizens Consumer Council Statement
Federal Communications Commission Hearing
Richmond, VA
February 27, 2003

Thank you for coming to Richmond for this hearing. This is a critical issue for a democratic country and the decisions you make will influence the future and will mean that citizens do or do not get the information and involvement that is necessary for our society.

The Virginia Citizens Consumer Council is very concerned about the changes that you have proposed. We believe that removal of the restrictions on media ownership will have a very negative effect on society. Given the problems that exist even with the restrictions, consumers will be badly harmed if they are removed.

It is already difficult to get the media to address consumer concerns, especially when they are complex and big companies have different perspectives from consumers. For example, Virginia has been involved in restructuring its electricity markets for over five years. During that time, there has been very limited media coverage. In one media market neither a concerned local legislator nor myself (making independent, uncoordinated contacts) were successful getting coverage as the critical decisions were made. We were told that the issue was "too complex" for people to understand. Recently, in another market, I had an op ed turned down but was told that a 100-200 word letter to the editor might be printed. However, it was not printed even though it supported the editorial view of the newspaper. Several weeks later a letter from someone else was printed on the topic. In the meantime, other issues were rehashed repeatedly but electric issues never appeared to matter to citizens, only to the editors.

If one entity is allowed to own multiple media outlets in the same market, it will be far too easy for that entity to totally control the public discourse. Citizens will hear one perspective regardless of whether they read the paper, listen to the radio or watch television. Many voices and perspectives will be lost. Many decisions will be made based on incomplete or incorrect information.

Recent consolidation radio stations has meant a loss of local news and weather reporting. For example, Clear Channel stations' news all comes from Texas and my experience has been that there is little news. This week as I drove across Virginia in a snowstorm and wondered about the roads ahead, the local station I found was a Clear Channel operation. While stations I had found previously on

the trip were reporting weather conditions regularly, the Clear Channel station never did. At the top of the hour it moved to a national program. While the location and call letters were mentioned regularly, there was no truly local information available, even in the midst of a snowstorm which caused wrecks and slow-downs on the interstate.

Radio ownership consolidation has also meant that some communities have lost important community voices. For example, here in Richmond when Clear Channel took over WRVA, a popular station for adults, the format changed to attempt to attract younger people. In the process, the community lost critical forums for discussion. I have not had an opportunity to discuss consumer issues on local radio since that change was made and I do not anticipate having it again anytime soon. There is no station with a format that would offer such an opportunity. However, when WRVA did it, many citizens listened and I got a lot of positive feed-back from a wide range of people. Why should FCC rules be changed to make it easy for more such losses?

VCCC hopes that as you make decisions that you consider the needs of all people – not just the large media companies that want to get bigger. Changes need to insure that every citizen has access to multiple voices not just one voice that is repeated in each media and from one community to another.

Last September the Consumer Federation of America and its state and local members, of which VCCC is one, had a nationwide town hall meeting on our media future. We adopted a set of principles. We hope that you will use them as you make these critical decisions. These principles advocate diversity of media ownership, open and available communications networks, media accountability to local communities, availability of public airwaves to the public, encouragement of community based media, and the protection and promotion of consumer fair use and privacy rights. A copy is attached.

Thank you for this opportunity.

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